

Strength & Unity

This year's Total Defence campaign, themed *Together We Keep Singapore Strong*, aims to bolster Singaporeans' resilience. PIONEER speaks to four groups of Singaporeans who keep the nation strong in their own ways.

// STORY ONG HONG TAT / PHOTOS KENNETH LIN



As the second batch to be trained in the HIMARS, the unit trained in the US and achieved REDCON 1. (From left) 3SG (NS) Lee, LTA (NS) Daniel Ng, LTA (NS) Ng Hong Kuan, CFC (NS) Sivaganesh and 3SG (NS) Lim.



Rocket soldiers

While most of their peers spent the December school break relaxing, the men of the 2nd High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) Battery were back in green for their annual In-Camp Training (ICT).

"We are the second batch to be trained in the HIMARS, and there is always this feeling of 'If we don't come back, then who will?'" said 3rd Sergeant (3SG) (NS) Daryl Lim, a Launch Commander.

Strong weapon

Accurate and mobile, the HIMARS can dispatch its six rockets at targets up to 70km away. With a 6.6 litre turbo-diesel engine, the almost 16-ton vehicle manages a top speed of 94kmh.

All HIMARS units are trained

in shoot-and-scoot tactics. Once the unit fires rockets from one location, it moves to another location to avoid counter-fire and to await further orders.

"Operating in this manner means that the Battery can be concealed until it's time to fire. In the field, this increases survivability as the enemy cannot detect or locate us easily," explained Lieutenant (LTA) (NS) Ng Hong Kuan, HIMARS Battery Commander.

Within the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF's) arsenal, the HIMARS is easily one of the heaviest-hitting assets. Units

spend their entire full-time National Service (NS) training to operate the platform efficiently and effectively. After they move on to become Operationally Ready National Servicemen (NSmen), they stay up to date through refresher training conducted at their annual ICT sessions.

Training overseas

During their NS days, the unit took part in the 2012 edition of Exercise Daring Warrior held at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in the United States (US) and achieved REDCON (Readiness Condition) 1, the highest possible grade for any operational SAF unit.

It was the culmination of months of preparation for

"I think the strength of the SAF system is that we are able to train soldiers to be proficient in their roles in a relatively short period of time."

- LTA (NS) Daniel Ng, Fire Direction Officer, 2 HIMARS Battery



The HIMARS in action overseas. With its long range and high accuracy, the HIMARS is a high-tech precision weapon.

3SG (NS) Bryan Lee and getting to finally fire the rockets was a real eye-opener.

“Despite being so small, we have a lot of firepower. It’s nice knowing that we have such weapons to protect us,” said 3SG (NS) Lee.

Boosting confidence

The annual ICT sessions help NSmen to re-learn some of the systems and maintain a basic level of proficiency.

“To be honest, at first I did think that coming for ICT was going to be a waste of my time,” said Corporal First Class (CFC) (NS) Sivaganesh, Battery Commander Gunnery Assistant.

Then he discovered, during

one of the refresher training sessions, that he had forgotten how to do his voice procedures correctly. In the Artillery, there is a certain set of voice procedures to follow before a firing.

“Having been away from the system for about a year, it’s good to come back to re-learn these steps.”

Serving NS duties

The majority of the Battery’s NSmen are pursuing further studies, so having to come back for ICT might be doubly painful for those looking to enjoy the year-end break.

Said LTA (NS) Ng: “We are one of the first few to be trained in the HIMARS. If we don’t do this,

who will? It’s also a good opportunity to catch up with each other and talk about how we’re doing.”

Some had other issues on their minds. “Sure, it stopped us from going out to look for internships during the break, but I think NS is important and necessary,” said 3SG (NS) Lim.

CFC (NS) Sivaganesh shared the sentiment: “We cannot afford a large regular Army... and we need to train diligently to build a reputable force.

“It’s like reading the newspapers daily; you just have to keep updating yourself.

“After all, having a capable and reputable army is already half the battle won.”



The men of 2 HIMARS Battery.



COP members patrolling the Teban Gardens housing estate.

Safer neighbourhood



very first Friday evening of the month, a special group of Teban Gardens residents

patrol their neighbourhood. They look out for people behaving suspiciously, people who are drunk or unruly, and people engaging in other unsafe practices.

As the Citizens on Patrol (COP) teams go about their patrols, it is clear that the residents welcome their presence. Every few metres or so, they are greeted by the residents or shopkeepers who stop them for brief chats.

It is one of the largest COP groups in Singapore, with more than 40 members. Each team comprises four or five COP members and is accompanied by Foreign Worker Ambassadors (FWA) and Police Officers.

“The FWAs help us to communicate with the foreign workers since they can speak their language,” said Mr Sunnie Tan, 62. He is in charge of the Joint COP team.



Mr Tan (standing, second from left) chatting with some residents while on patrol.

Coming together

In the past, each of the zones within the Teban Gardens estate had their own COP groups. In 2011, the idea was expanded.

This was the beginning of a Joint COP team that would patrol the entire estate and coordinate their efforts. “In addition to the Joint COP, smaller groups from the other zones still do their patrols at least once a week,” said Mr Tan.

When the Joint COP started in 2011, strangers could often be seen loitering around the estate in droves. Some would even get drunk and behave in a rowdy manner. “We used to see them lying or sitting around in the

dark, and it made the residents fear for their own safety, especially when they returned home late,” explained Mr Tan.

Said COP member Mr Teoh Chin Chong: “It is not that we don’t welcome other people in our estate. We just want them to behave properly, that’s all.”

Engaging the community

After speaking with some foreign workers, they learnt that one of the reasons they congregate in the estate was to access supermarkets and Automated Teller Machines.

“So we came up with the idea to build them a recreation centre, with the amenities they need, nearer to their dormitories,” said Mr Teoh.

As volunteers with no powers of arrest, the COP members use the power of persuasion. “Sometimes, when we see people riding bicycles at night with no lights, we stop them and talk to them. Usually they are receptive, but there have been a few who responded rudely or aggressively,” said Ms Lily Lek.

That is when the Police Officers step in with a firmer tone. Under local regulations, bicycles must be fitted with working lights, when being used after dark, for safety reasons.

“Sometimes we also see young people hanky-panky *lah*, and we tell them that it is not right to do this in public,” said Mr Adamusa Bin Abdul Hameed with a chuckle.

Eyes and ears

Though their main task remains the security and safety of residents, the COP teams also serve as additional lookouts for the various agencies. For example, they report on clogged drains and potholed pathways to the relevant agencies too.



The combined COP team. First row from right: Mr Tan, Ms Kathleen Goh, Ms Lek, Mr Adamusa and Mr Teoh.

“The agencies cannot possibly be on the ground all the time, so we help by keeping a lookout,” said Mr Tan, who has served in the Teban Gardens COP teams for more than 20 years, and is currently Chairman of the Community Emergency and Engagement committee.

These days, the environment in the estate is much better. Non-residents who visit the estate are better behaved. Instances of illegal barbeques have also stopped.

“We have established a certain level of rapport with the residents. They tell us that they feel good when they see us patrolling regularly,” said Mr Tan.



Hope Technik employees posing for a photo at their unusual lobby that has a slide and rock-climbing wall.

High on hope

Nestled in Jurong is probably one of Singapore’s most underrated tech companies. Hope Technik occupies a 50,000sq ft, three-storey building with a main lobby that has a slide and a rock-climbing wall.

Quite unusual, till you remember that this is the company that has a list of “Ten Commandments” plastered on the wall of its entrance. Number two reads: “We are engineering commandos. Small in number,

strong in force.” For this company, “unusual” is in their DNA.

High performance engineering

Hope Technik designs and builds all manner of practical equipment, from firefighting vehicles for the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) to drones for the Maritime Port Authority of Singapore (MPA). It has even built a space-plane prototype!

The company’s most visible product is probably the Red Rhino Light Fire Attack Vehicle

it designed and built for the SCDF. “Getting that contract was the first high for the company,” said Mr Jeff Tang, co-founder and Technical Director.

“Most other companies would have approached this by doing as few modifications as possible. But that is not the way Hope Technik works,” he added.

The company went to work on a truck, figuring out how to fit the SCDF’s requirements into a vehicle that was meant to be fast and nimble.

“Most of the components ended up underneath the vehicle, in a bid to keep the centre of gravity low and driveable at high

speeds,” said Mr Tang. Today, the company is working on the fifth generation of Red Rhino vehicles.

Seeing hope

Putting in 16-hour work days is not uncommon at the company, but it is the work that keeps them coming back. “For us, it is about the pursuit of engineering,” said Mr Chiew Yee Kin, 34, Senior Electrical Engineer.

“We love to tinker and to find out how things work. In the end, I think it stems from wanting to improve things for ourselves and make the world slightly better.”

The company recently delivered a prototype drone to MPA that is designed to help



Mechanical Engineer Vinoth Pannirsilvam in the cockpit of a fifth-generation Red Rhino.

monitor oil spills. For that, Mr Chiew and his team had to endure long stretches out at sea, testing the drone to make sure that it functioned as designed.

Starting out

The company began in 2006 wanting to make motorsports equipment for the region (The four founders were previously from the motorsports industry). “That didn’t work out because there’s not much business for motorsports in the region,” said Mr Tang.

The first project Hope Technik did was to modify a small engine for DSO National Laboratories. “That led to more contracts from the defence tech community and subsequently from the SCDF,” he added.

The company has now grown to 90 staff members — mostly engineers. Expanding at a high rate of 50 percent year-on-year, it relies on word of mouth for referrals.

Strength in diversity

Hope Technik straddles many disciplines, from aviation and unmanned systems to special vehicles and medical devices.

Where does the company find the strength to engineer so many different solutions? “Our strength is in finding good leaders and experts in their own fields,” said Mr Tang.

Helping others in need

It is barely 5am and the Willing Hearts kitchen, located at Jalan Ubi in Geylang Serai, is already bustling with activity. Noodles are being fried in a huge wok. Next to it, a simple vegetable dish is being cooked. At the back, vegetables and fruits are being chopped and diced.

Steaming white rice also begins to stream onto packing tables, where volunteers are dishing out portions into styrofoam boxes. "We give out about 5,500 packs of food per day," said Mr Tony Tay, 69, founder of Willing Hearts. He is dressed simply in a T-shirt and slacks.

At 6.30am, the first of more than 40 delivery locations receives the packed food from the hands of Willing Hearts volunteers. The day can end as late as 7pm for Mr Tay, after the kitchen is cleaned and the next day's food is prepared.

The next day, every day, the same cycle starts all over again.

Giving back

Growing up, Mr Tay and his family didn't have much. "I come from a very poor family. At age five, the Canossian Sisters took in my sister and me and we lived with them for five years."

After leaving the Canossian home, the siblings would sometimes go to the Sikh temples for free food. "When we were older and made money, we forgot the poor," said Mr Tay.



Volunteers packing food into individual portions.



Volunteers preparing the meals for delivery early in the morning.



Mr Tay (in blue) briefing volunteers on how to pack the food.



Ms Oei getting ready to make her deliveries.

"One day in 2003, I was asked by the Canossian Sisters to help distribute bread. It was then that I saw the conditions of the poor and decided to help.

"So we started cooking at home, then moved to other locations before we found this current kitchen."

Even though the rent is comparatively low, the charity still needs support to keep going. "Counting utilities and water, it costs about \$100,000

annually to sustain Willing Hearts." But Mr Tay would rather people volunteer their time than just give money.

"Money is easy to give, but volunteering in the kitchen takes time and commitment. More importantly, it raises awareness that there are people who need our help."

Why they volunteer

For long-time volunteers like Ms Elsie Oei, the work is

infinitely rewarding. "I spent 36 years working in hotels as a housekeeper. Here (at Willing Hearts), I work for free but I'm happy," said the 69-year-old retiree.

She helps in almost all aspects of the charity, from preparing the ingredients to cooking and delivery. "I lose myself in the work here and it beats staying at home and quarrelling with my *Ah Lau* (husband)!" she said, laughing.

She remembers the first

time she helped to distribute food in 2005. "I always thought Singapore was very rich, high-rise skyscrapers everywhere, but some of these people (whom we were serving) were so poor that they didn't even have a mattress to sleep on in their homes."

Others like Mr Simon Ng volunteer in other ways. The 55-year-old taxi driver helps to send food to the distribution points dotting the island.

"I coordinate with my friends, who are also taxi drivers, to send the food.

"We send food to about eight locations across the island daily."


Doing what they can

As a charity that is entirely dependent on volunteers' help and food donations, it is amazing that they manage to do it without maintaining a daily roster.

Willing Hearts is one of the few charity organisations that does not demand certain hours from its volunteers. "Our volunteers come when they are free, do what they can and leave when they must," said Mr Tay.

When PIONEER visited the charity, there was a group from the Navy Recruitment Centre helping to prepare vegetables and another youth group helping to pack the food.

"That's the way it is daily. Volunteering is not a demand. What's more important is that the volunteers come ready to help," said Mr Tay.

"I'll continue this for as long as I am able." 

Interested in volunteering?

Visit willinghearts.org.sg/volunteer/ or call Mr Tony Tay at 6476 5822

THINGS TO DO FOR TOTAL DEFENCE!

This year's TD campaign has lined up a slew of activities, so remember to join in the fun!

TD EXHIBITIONS

 **2 Feb – 20 Mar,** at the S'pore Discovery Centre

Early to mid February, The Marketplace at The Future of Us exhibition at Gardens by the Bay

The exhibitions will feature stories to provoke visitors to reflect on future threats and challenges that Singapore may face, be inspired by Singaporeans who have played a part in TD, and commit personally to keeping Singapore safe and strong. For more details, visit totaldefence.sg.

SGFUTURE ENGAGEMENT

 **Late January – May**

Singaporeans will be asked to share their hopes and dreams for the country in the areas of security and resilience. This initiative aims to encourage Singaporeans to build a shared vision, strengthen national identity and give Singaporeans ownership over the country's future.

TOTAL DEFENCE DAY

15 Feb

Total Defence Commemoration Day event to be held in the Theatre of Generations dome within The Future of Us exhibition.



*Also keep an eye out for TD tours, a TD play and the announcement of winners of the annual N.E.mation! Competition.